

REZANOV

By GERTRUDE ATHERTON.



"HE BENT DOWN AND KISSED HER FOR THE FIRST TIME WITHOUT PASSION."

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XXII.—(Continued.)

There was a peaceful interlude, during which the men, holding bow and arrow aloft, hopped up and down on one spot, the women hopping beside them and snapping thumb and forefinger on the body, still singing in the same high measured voice. But while they danced a great bonfire was laid and kindled. The gyrations lasted a few moments longer, then the chief seized a live ember and swallowed it. His example was immediately followed by his tribe, and, whether to relieve discomfort or with energies but quickened, they executed a series of incredible handsprings and acrobatic capers. When they finally whirled away on toes and finger tips, another chief, in the horns and hide of a deer, rushed in, pursued by a party of hunters. For several moments he perfectly simulated a hunted animal, lurking and dodging in high grass, behind trees, venturing to the brink of a stream to drink, searching eagerly for his mate; and when he finally escaped it was amidst the most enthusiastic plaudits as yet evoked.

After an hour of this varied performance, the square was enlarged by several mounted vaqueros galloping about with warning cries and much flourishing of lasso. They were the cattle herders of the Mission ranch just over the hills, and were in gala attire of black glazed sombrero with silver cord, white shirt open at the throat, short black velvet trousers laced with silver, red sash and high yellow boots. Four, pistol in hand, stationed themselves in front of the corridor, while the others rode out and in again, dragging a bear and a bull, with hind legs attached by two yards of rope. The captors left the captives in the middle of the square, and without more ado the serious sport of the day began. The bull, with stomach empty and hide inflamed, rushed at the bear, furious from captivity, with such a roar that the Indian women screamed and even the men shuddered their feet uneasily. But neither combatant was interested in aught but the other. The one sought to gore, his enemy to strike or hug. The vaqueros teased them with arrows and cries, the dust flew; for a few moments there was but a heaving, panting, lashing bulk in the middle of the arena, and then the bull, his tongue torn out, rolled on his back, and another was driven in before the victor could wreak his unsated vengeance among the spectators. The bear, dragging the dead bull, rushed at the living, who, unmortified at first, stiffened to the defensive as he saw a bulk of wiry fur set with eyes of fire, almost upon him. He sprang aside, lowered his horns, and caught the bear in the chest. But the victor was a compact mass of battle and momentum. His onslaught flung the bear over backward, and quickly disengaging himself he made another leap at his equally agile enemy. This time the battle was longer and more various, for the bull was smaller, more active and dexterous. Twice he almost had the bear on his horns, but was rolled, only saving his neck and back from the fury of the mountain beast by such a kicking and leaping that both combatants were indistinguishable from the whirlwind of dust. Out of this they would emerge to stand panting in front

of each other with tongues pendant and red eyes rolling. Finally the bear, nearly exhausted, made a sudden charge, the bull leaped aside, back again with incredible swiftness, caught the bear in the belly, tossed him so high that he met the hard earth with a loud cracking of bone. The vaqueros circled about the maddened bull, set his hide thick with arrows, tripped him with the lasso. A wiry little Mexican in yellow, galloping in on his mustang, administered the coup de grace amidst the wild applause of the spectators, whose shouting and clapping and stamping might have been heard by the envious guard at the Presidio and Yerba Buena.

As the party on the corridor broke, Rezanov found no difficulty in reaching Concha's side, for even Dona Ignacia was chattering wildly with several other good dames who renewed their youth briefly at the bull-fight.

"Did you enjoy that?" he asked curiously.

"I did not look at it. I never do. But I know that you were not affronted. You never took your eyes from those dreadful beasts."

"I am exhilarated to know that you watched me. Yes, at a bull-fight the primitive man in me has its way, although I have the grace to be ashamed of myself afterward. In that I am at least one degree more civilized than your race, which never repents."

The door of one of the smaller rooms stood open, and as they took advantage of this oversight with a singular concert of motive, he took both her hands in his. "Are you angry with me?" he asked softly. He dared not close the door, but his back was square against it, and the other guests were moving down to the refectory.

"For liking such horrid sport?"

"We have no time to waste in coquetry."

Her eyes melted, but she could not resist planting a dart. "Not now—I quite understand: love could never be first with you. And two years are not so long. They quickly pass when one is busy. I shall find occupation, and you will have no time for longings and regrets."

They were not yet alone, women were talking in their light, high voices not a yard away. The hindrance and her new loveliness in the soft mantilla, the pink of the roses reflected in her throat, the provocative curl of her mouth, sent the blood to his head.

"You have only to say the word," he said hoarsely, "and the Juno will sail to-night."

Never before had she seen his face so unmasked. Her voice shook in triumph and response.

"Would you? Would you?"

"Say the word!"

"You would sacrifice all—the company—your career—your Sitkans?"

"All—everything." His own voice shook with more than passion, for even in that moment he counted the cost, but he did not care.

But Concha detected that second break in his voice, and turned her head sadly.

"You would not say that to-morrow. I hate myself that I made you say it now. I love you enough to wait forever, but I have not the courage to hand you over to your enemies."

"You are strangely far-sighted for a young girl." And between admiration and pique, his ardor suffered a chill.

"I am no longer a young girl. In these last days it has seemed to me that secrets locked in my brain, secrets of women long dead, but of whose essence I am, have come forth to the light. I have suffered in anticipation. My mind has flown—flown—I have lived those two years until they are twenty, thirty, and I have lived on into old age here by the sea, watching, watching."

She had dropped all pretence of coquetry and was speaking with a passionate forlornness. But before he could interrupt her, take advantage of the retreating voices that left them alone at last, she had drawn herself up and moved a step away. "Do not think, however," she said proudly, "that I am really as weak and silly as that. It was only a mood. Should you not return I should grieve, yes; and should I live as long as is common with my race, still would my heart remain young with your image, and with the fidelity that would be no less a religion than that of my church. But I should not live a selfish life, or I should be unworthy of my election to experience a great and eternal passion. Memory and the life of the imagination would be my solace, possibly in time my happiness, but my days I should give to this poor little world of ours; and all that one mortal, and that a woman, has to bestow upon a stranded and benighted people. It may not be much, but I make you that promise, señor, that you will not think me a foolish, romantic girl unworthy of the great responsibilities you have offered me."

"Concha!" He was deeply moved, and at the same time her words chilled him with subtle prophecy, sank into some unexplored depth of his consciousness, meeting response as subtle, filling him with a rush of angry impatience at the mortality of man. He glanced over his shoulder, then took her recklessly in his arms.